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My Philosophy of Rural Recreation

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MY PHILOSOPHY OF RURAL RECREATION*

Introduction

Lying back of an extension program in rural recreation must be a philosophy. It shall be my task briefly to indicate the elements of my own philosophy of rural recreation, in the hope that it may either appeal to you as a sufficient warrant to work out a program, or will stimulate the appearance of another philosophy as a proper basc for a good program. In the first place, purely as an introductory detail, let me touch upon the authority for use of Federal funds in a program of rural recreation.

You recall that there are three accepted economic factors in agriculture; land, capital, and the human factor. Any improvement in agriculture must obviously reckon with each of these factors separately and with each factor in relation to the others. Any reasonable attempt, therefore, to instruct the farmer and his family in the improvement of the human factor in agriculture, through an extension program, is valid under the various existing acts of Congress authorizing the Extension Service and agricultural research. No further legislation of Congress is necessary to authorize instruction and demonstration in rural recreation for the benefit of rural men and women, boys and girls, providing only that it is clear beyond a shadow of doubt that a technique of organized recreation for the farm family and farm community will result in a measurable improvement in agriculture. I shall, therefore, in my philosophy of rural recreation, address myself to the question of whether recreation has a role of decided value in making the farmer efficient in his life and occupation. I open my remarks with an appeal to the experience of men in regard to play and work in urban life.

Experience of the World in Regard to Urban Play and Work

The modern world, whether you take the view of the learned man or of the man of the street, is convinced that occupational work and labor in cities - in the interest, mind you, of the occupation as well as of the worker - must be decidedly restricted to allow the worker every day a considerable period of time to himself for other purposes than labor - usually

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called "rest" or "leisure time." The term "shorter hours" of labor for unskilled and skilled workers has been wrought into a veritable formula of urban progress, both for industry and for human welfare. Daily hours of labor in the past two generations have thus been cut down from ten or twelve or fourteen to seven or eight or ten. Besides these shorter hours each day, half holidays have more recently crept into vogue. Besides these occasional holidays, longer periods called vacations have become customary, a week or two, or even more with pay, still in the interest of the product, the business, the occupation, as well as of the worker. In fact, both science and ordinary experience now take the position that more and better economic production comes by giving urban workers these short hours of daily labor, half holidays, and regular annual vacations.

But this is not the whole story. Business, industry, and science itself are not in favor of the worker's having this extra free time for idleness, for a vacuum of unoccupied time or interest or activity. The free time is not necessarily to add to sleep, or to meal time. Some of it may be expected to be used in personal attention to one's appearance; to more time in the atmosphere of home; to keeping up the looks and repair of the house and home. But what lies back in the mind of the scientist and the captain of industry as well - as a major motive - is that free time will be given to re-creating the human energies of the worker through diversion, amusement, entertainment, recreation - in fact through play in some of its many forms.

Many industries have created free facilities of play for their workers; club houses, gymnasiums, swimming pools, athletic fields, with trained supervisors of play. In other cases, municipalities have established these supervised-play facilities for the city worker and his children. Nobody believes nowadays that a city is safe with its workers idle and no play in sight for them. No. Continued unoccupied time is not rest, not recovery from fatigue, not recreation, in the experience of industry. Idle time spells deterioration of human bodies and minds. Play, adapted, organized, is the modern medicine for fatigue of the urban worker. Play is, therefore, a proper complement of urban work. Now it is this consensus of modern opinion in urban life which creates, in my opinion, a presumption that in farm life recreation, organized properly, will play a similar part, and lead to an improvement in agriculture. So, let us inquire into the farmer's manner of life to see whether there are any peculiarities in his occupational situation which make play and recreation unnecessary.

A Closer Analysis of Play and Farm Life.

Only a little observation is required to satisfy any one that in all countries among peasants and farmers play has existed and been recognized as a very part of country life. Festivals, celebrations, fairs, tournaments of skill, folk dances, choral occasions, have been events given over to joy and work-oblivion. In our own country, bees of many kinds as work-parties, suppers, box-sociables, entertainments, straw-rides, picnics, plowing matches, house-warmings, squirrel hunts, wolf drives, pageants, circuses, community fairs, baseball leagues indicate a rural recognition

of "good times" as a legitimate part of life - these good times all being essentially forms of play. But further observation and closer analysis of American country life show that play and recreation in the farm family and farm community are, compared with urban play, more intermittent, more occasional, and highly unorganized. There is a drifting, haphazard element in rural play. Rural play is at the mercy of extremely fortuitous circumstances. Months may pass in a community without a community play occasion. This is evidence of a lack of regularity in play as a complement to balance the regularity of labor and work. It shows some recognition to play - perhaps a concession to childhood and youth rather than a surrender to the outstanding value of play for adults - but no driving conviction that play is necessary to an efficient agriculture. It is at this point that we need to look into the psychology of play, and come to a conclusion as to its rightful regular place in the program of farm life.

Play that gives no pleasure to the player is not recreation whether rural or urban; in fact, it is play only in name. One man's play may be another man's work. Real play opens the valves of joy in the soul, and joy recreates, flushes the system of its work-poisons, sets hope on a pinnacle again, revives self-respect, restores tolerance of other people, puts zest into living. The professional player works at playing, and needs another discipline in which to relax - for example, the professional baseball player, musician, dancer, runner, tennis star, golf-player extraordinary. As children tire easily of one form of play, and seek another, so adults tire, and turn from one form of recreation to another. And fortunately the variety of play is beyond calculation. Conversation with wit and humor in the foreground is play, and relieves the tension of work. A good story well-told, a story read aloud, or even to oneself is play. This fountain of pleasure, of joy within, healing the pains of work, comforting the disappointments of business, dissolving the worries and vexations of occupation are like angels of mercy, which quickly restore balance to personality, and hand the worker back to his work with renewed energy and determination.

The query arises in our minds whether the farmer and his family need, really and truly need, the play element as a therapeutic in their lives, as does the urban dweller. From time to time you hear it said that the outdoor life of the farmer, of the farm boy and girl, provides a tonic in itself which acts upon body and soul, purging of poison and renewing the life. To a certain extent, there is undoubted truth in the idea. A noted contribution to the subject of country life was made a few years ago in an essay written by a cultivated "Virginia farmer," on "The Catharsis of Husbandry," and read at the Farmers' Dinner in the University Club, New York City, in 1912; a delightful depiction of agriculture as a healing restorative to the pent soul.

We may grant, I think, that there is healing for human ills in work with the soil, cattle, crops, and woodlands, under the open sky; but realism demands of us a true picture of farming year in and year out. And in order to give true perspective to the native advantages of farming, we must admit that the strain of constant physical labor upon all members of the farm family, the long hours of duty, the continuity of attention, require - as a protection against the hardening of the sensibilities and the eclipse of the

intellect - regular periods of rest, and regular periods of play and recreation. This applies to old as well as young. Modern agriculture is built on science, knowledge, discernment. The stolid peasant in whom much of life lay dormant, did not, perhaps, and could not, play enough to keep his faculties on edge. American farmers, however, must keep alive, keen, optimistic, advancing. The role of play in the farmer's life, therefore, is doubly necessary now. Let him work with a will; but then let him play and forget his work. The out-of-doors to man hard at work, moreover, is far different from the out-of-doors as a companion to man on holiday. Just as the banker needs to get out into the open and forget money, so the farmer needs to get out and forget crops and weather, giving himself up to the pleasuresof nature.) Let us consider some well-known theories of play, and try to apply these to the farmer's case.

A New Philosophy of Play with Application to Farm People

There are several valid philosophies of play as a balance of work: for example, it is natural to play, for all children play automatically, and even all young animals play, and so however irrational or mysterious play may be, it must have its place, as nature not only demands it, but insures its practice by instinct; play, it is held by others, is a change from work, a radical change, in fact, more of a change than another kind of work would be, and nature demands a thorough neuro-muscular periodic change from work, just as nature demands sleep, as a medicine for fatigue; akin to this is the pleasure theory, already introduced earlier in my story, namely, periodic pleasure, of a highly volatile character, is needed to drive the poisons of fatigue away. And so the list might be made longer, more technical, and more scientific perhaps. I wish to propose another philosophy, one of my own, which while related to the other theories, brings out a somewhat different element. Let me try to convey this philosophy to you first, by an indirect or roundabout approach.

If I am not very much mistaken, it is something of a shock to us as we come to years of maturity to find out that human life, wherever it is lived, whatever the lot or occupation in life, whatever the possessions, whatever the accomplishments, friendships, honors, achievements - human life is defective. We learn with surprise and sorrow that life has its weak spots like a flaw in steel, an air bubble in the lens, a knot in the board, rot in the apple. And these defects in human life give constant unrest and discontent.

In the attempt to take the flaws out of human life and prevent its breakdowns, several great systems of thought have been developed; science, art, business, religion. Science would make us know enough to circumvent these breakdowns. Art would make the world and life beautiful enough to submerge and suppress defects. Business would give us all wealth enough to outwit deficiencies. And religion, confessing that man is born to discontent, sin, and death, would turn his gaze to a new and better world which holds life in perfection, and thus makes life on earth tolerable through hope.

If I read human character aright, one of the great sources of human discontent and depletion of energy is the fact that each person must live all his days with himself. His body is married to his soul. His soul is

married to his brain and mind. And he must ever talk, think, act in character with himself - a self which is highly charged with and very much predetermined by the past. He is short in stature, forsooth, he would be tall. He is brunette, he would be blond. But more, the pattern of his thinking is monotonously the same, even if creditable to himself. He may be slow at figures, quick in temper. He envies his neighbor. He covets this man's suavity, that man's poise. He is out of sorts with himself, while he may not be at one with his fellows; and he blames his lot, he blames his occupation, he blames the world, he wonders why he was born.

Now what I have to say is a ridiculously simple thing. But I will brave your smiles, It is this. Play provides a way of escape, to a certain degree, from perpetual confinement to one's own petty personality.

The constant application to one's special job tends to present a particular facet of one's character always in front - a constant, monotonous reaction, a behavior, an aspect of which one can not apparently divest himself, and natural discontent, and monotony of his very own companionship palls on him. So man welcomes play, which in essence, as revealed in all children, is make-believe, a masquerade, a putting off of one's work-a-day personality and a putting on of some totally different character. You see the delight of children to play-act as adults, as animals, as trees and plants. They dress the part. They personify their environment. Youth gets the same effect through costuming. The change of clothes from work garb to holiday, to Sunday best, to sport clothes, to hunting togs, to riding garb, changes the personality. Every reaction is different with new clothes. This is why a game like golf creates its costumes. One can not play golf with abandon, in ordinary work clothes. Tennis requires its tennis costume, Boys must have Scout suits to get into Scout character.

My theory of play, therefore, is that one rests, relieves and refreshes his character, his psychic behavior, his monotonous self, by a species of make-believe in play and recreation. For this reason, idleness is not constructive play. One must in play take on a real set of motives, activities, as a variation. Of course one thus forgets his work, rests from his job; but more than this, he enters into a new being, a new existence awhile, and so frees himself from all the rubs, bruises, and slaveries of his constant behavior. This type of play really recreates the personality.

Now the farmer, farm woman and farm children, being human beings, liable to the bondage of a constant type of behavior and occupation, need to "get out of themselves" regularly just as much as anybody. To allow oneself to become imprisoned in the work-a-day personality is really to conspire against one's growth, expansion, and greater happiness. I have always believed that the great companionship of nature in the presence of woods, space, sky, animals, has afforded much relief to the farmer's occupational monotony; but I still can see many adult farm people heavily weighted down with a work-a-day phase of living which limits their appreciation of the world with which they must in modern times keep house. My philosophy of play calls, therefore, for a program of recreation for farm people suited to their particular needs. This leads me to the next part

of my philosophy of rural play.

Play, real play, is always founded, according to my theory, upon the idea of other personalities than one's own; and in this sense is fundamentally social. But the type of play and recreation which is adjusted to rural needs, in my estimation, must be social, in fact socialized, to a still higher degree. It must be a play actually with other persons, many other persons. Farm families need the rest and relief from their own family behavior. They need as families to forget their own peculiar family customs. They need to get out of their own family trees and make believe be in another line and pedigree for a little while. So a social program of recreation is certainly a logical necessity to balance the work program of the modern farmer.

Organization the Key to Social Recreation

This conclusion that the American farm family needs a program of socialized recreation leads at once to the question of organized play for young and old on farms. An important element of human progress like socialized play and recreation can not be achieved by laissez-faire tactics, principally because where an adjustment of leisure-time pursuits to work conditions must be devised, there is required a deal of serious thinking. Work conditions differ in various regions. Leisure time varies. Work itself is varied, and requires as a play complement, differing types of play. In fact, this whole matter of adjusting play to work habits demands a serious technique. Play forms have now their technicians, even as education has developed the technical educator. So a program of play will face the matter of the proper forms of play to offset particular types of work, and also and equally the proper methods of putting these social play forms into effect in communities, counties, and States. The question of a trained leadership comes to the fore. The question of play facilities of a community character come to the front, precisely as in matters of public rural health, the health facilities must be considered as well as approved methods.

Conclusion

My part today is simply that of presenting an argument, so to speak, for the validity of a play program for country people, old and young. It is not my place to discuss the various types of play which may be approved to find a place on a program of recreation. Nor have I intended to discuss whether children and youth and adults may participate in the same types of play. I know that the whole question of selection of a program of play for a region is an intricate one. The States moreover are not wholly without experience in this matter. Beginnings have been made. I have only a word of caution at this point, namely, that, in fairness to our farm people, a program, whatever be its make-up, have as sound a foundation as farming itself. The human factor is the sensitive factor in rural progress; and an attempt to improve the human factor in agriculture requires as much wisdom as the attempt to improve any factor in agriculture. The shifting of human gears from work to play and from play back again to work requires all the skill man has learned in the ages of civilization; for the final problem is not only to improve the character of agriculture, but to increase meanwhile the happiness of agricultural workers.